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# Teaching in a Standardized World: An Autoethnography of My Student and Teacher Life

Caitlin Anne Hunter  
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# **Teaching in a Standardized World: An Autoethnography of My Student and Teacher Life**

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at  
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors  
May 2015

Honors Capstone Project in Secondary History Education

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## **Abstract**

This paper is an autoethnography, which is a study of me and of my teaching. Through reflecting on my life as a student and a teacher, I have found that the difference between standardization and differentiation has stuck out and influenced both my learning and my teaching. I have chosen to focus on these two areas of education in looking at assessment and instruction. This paper weaves together a review of literature of differentiation, standardization and the history of standardized testing with anecdotes from my life. Throughout this process I will look at the question, “How does one differentiate in a standardized model?” Through this reflective paper, I hope to gain insight to who I am as a teacher, as shaped by the context around me and the experiences that I have had, both as a student and as a teacher.

## **Executive Summary**

My Honors Capstone is entitled: Teaching in a Standardized World: An Autoethnography of My Student and Teacher Life. First one must understand what an autoethnography is. Breaking the word apart, “ethnography” is the study of individual cultures. “Auto” simply refers to self. This project is a self-study of the creation of the philosophies, or pedagogy, of my teaching. The aim of the project is to look at how my education as a student in public school, K-12, my education as a pre-service teacher at Syracuse University and my experiences student teaching have shaped my views and philosophies of teaching.

Throughout my career at Syracuse University, I have been taught to reflect on observations in the classroom along with student teaching itself. Often it is a built in grade for every education class that we take. Our professors want us to think about what we are experiencing and how that is affecting us. This project is that but on a larger scale. I am taking a look at experiences from being a student all the way to my experiences as a teacher to try and understand where my views of teaching come from. As education students we are taught that students will bring their experiences into the classroom and those will color how they take in the material that we present to them. As teachers we must understand and be aware of that. Often we are taught that as teachers we are to be objective, but there is no way that any one teacher can be completely unbiased. We as teachers, just like our students, bring in our experiences to classroom, which shape how we teach, what we teach, and why we teach. In order to be the best teacher I can be, I need to understand my experiences and how those can affect my teaching and my students’ learning.

My paper is broken up into different sections, all which aim to answer my research question: “How, as a teacher, do I differentiate in a standardized, one size fits all world?”

Standardization is the process of only teaching or assessing in one way. The most common form of this is seen in what is known as standardized testing. This is when all students are assessed using the same test. Standardize instruction is often the use of the same method of teaching with no variation. The most common form of standardized instruction that is often thought of is a lecture style class, where students sit and take notes. While standardization has been around since the 1800s, it has been on the rise over the past decade due to government policies such as No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top, which aim to close the achievement gap and keep schools accountable. I beg to ask, how can we teach to all students? The answer is through differentiation. Differentiation is the process of presenting material and assessing students in multiple ways to meet their needs as learners. Differentiation focuses on how the student learns and the student's needs. Rather than attempting to deliver the content or assess in the most efficient way, differentiation aims to take time and teach in the most effective way. In today's teaching environment, where teachers are evaluated based on student performance on standardized tests, it is harder and harder to differentiate and not fall into the trap of standardized teaching and assessment.

My paper opens with an anecdote about how I did not understand how other children could read in kindergarten. From there I move on to define autoethnography and its purpose as an academic paper. From there my paper weaves together a review of literature and research that I conducted and personal stories and experiences. The goal is to define standardization and differentiation, explain their impacts and then show how they have played a role in my student and teacher life. There are three sections that are a review of literature, these are The History of Standardization, Problems with Standardization and Differentiation. These sections give a context to the environment of teaching as it is today, and the hopes and philosophies of teaching

that my pedagogy is rooted in. There are four autoethnographic sections. These are: Differentiation as a Student, Standardization as a Student, Differentiation as a Teacher and Standardization as a Teacher. These sections aim to help both myself and the reader view how I have experienced differentiation and standardization as a student and a teacher. I have written about experiences that have stuck with me through my educational career. Stories that come from my student perspective are from kindergarten through my time at Syracuse University. Experiences that I write about as a teacher come from the two semesters that I spent student teaching, one semester as a part time student teacher in a 9th grade classroom and one semester as a full time student teacher in an 11th grade classroom. I want to see how my individual experiences with both standardization and differentiation contribute to my thoughts on education and teaching.

My research begins with standardization. I define standardization and discuss the history as a whole and within the New York State Board of Education. After giving the history of standardization, I move to discuss how I have viewed standardization as a student in public schools along with being a student in college. From there I discuss issues that can arise with standardization. I focus on three issues: test anxiety, time spent on test content, and the standardized test becoming the objective of education. The next section focuses on my experiences with standardization as a student teacher. I make readers aware of how many of the problems that I faced in teaching were the complaints and concerns that I found in my research.

I then move to the other side of the spectrum and define differentiation. I spend time reviewing Multiple Intelligences, a term coined by Howard Gardner, which is the idea student intelligence should not be determined by how smart one is but rather how one is smart. He lists eight different intelligences in which learners can fall into. These have become essential to

differentiation. I discuss ways in which differentiation can be used in the classroom. While I list examples, it is important to note that the strategies I write about from my research only scratch the surface of how differentiation can be used. After my review of literature on differentiation, I move to discuss my personal experiences with the concept and pedagogy. I begin with talking about my experience with differentiation as a student, specifically related to my fourth grade class. Finally, I discuss my experiences with being a teacher and trying to differentiate. I discover that while I hold differentiation to a gold standard and aim to differentiate within my classroom, I often fail to reach my goal.

Finally I end with concluding thoughts on what I can take away from both my review of literature and my personal experiences. What have I learned? Are there any patterns that I have found? How do I think this will affect my future teaching? We are in a world that increasingly places weight on standardized test scores, causing teachers to standardize this instruction. I know, as a teacher, I want to avoid this, but often fall into the trap of teaching to the test, rather than trying to differentiate for my students. This paper and the process of reflecting have shown me what is truly important to me as a teacher. Since this is the case, I go on to explain future plans. I focus on how I plan to further my education in order to add more differentiation techniques to my repertoire to make me a better teacher. Never ceasing to learn new techniques is just as important as reflection and awareness of experiences and biases, in order to be an effective teacher.

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Teaching in a Standardized World:  
An Autoethnography of My Student and Teacher Life

By

Caitlin Hunter

The big book at the front of the room had frogs on it. That was all I knew. Some were hopping, others swimming. Mr. Clark, my kindergarten teacher asked one of us to read the words on the page. I remember being confused. Who could know that? The child sitting next to me did. He must have said something along the lines of, “The frog hops” or “The frog jumps.” Whatever he read was correct and our teacher praised him. I knew that there were letters on the page, but how was one supposed to read? How did he figure out what words those letters meant? All I could do was say that there were frogs in the picture.

This is my first memory of reading and would begin my struggle with the skill. It was not until the third grade and after countless hours with a private tutor that I truly learned how to read. Being behind in the skill that is at the essence of learning caused me to feel dumb and stupid the majority of my elementary career. I always wondered why everyone could get their work done so much faster than I could. I would sit and stare at my worksheet. I did not know how to complete it, because I did not know what was being asked of me. It seemed that my teachers were not really sure what to do with me or how to teach me. The school I was at would not offer any support. The task was left to my parents, both educators. After visits to psychologists, reading specialists and tutoring, I finally began to read. I would eventually grasp the skill and excel in school. My self-esteem would finally grow. I made the decision to dedicate my life to teaching. I decided that I never wanted a child to feel stupid, the way I did. School is a place to foster learning. A child cannot learn if they do not have the self-efficacy or self-esteem in which to do

so. I did have great teachers along the way that worked with me and built me up. My decision to go into teaching is a tribute to them and my desire to affect students the way that they have affected me.

Through reflecting on my life as a student and a teacher, I have found that the difference between standardization and differentiation has stuck out and influenced both my learning and my teaching. I have chosen to focus on these two areas of education in looking at assessment and instruction. This paper weaves together a review of literature of differentiation, standardization and the history of standardized testing with anecdotes from my life. Through this process I will look at the question, “How does one differentiate in a standardized model?” I begin with the definition of standardization and standardized tests. From there I give stories about how I, as a student, experienced standardization. I then move to talk about problems with standardization and then how I have viewed it as a teacher. I will then move to the other end of the spectrum and define differentiation and its application. Lastly, I will discuss how I have seen and experienced differentiation as a student and a teacher. I end with implications of the educational context that teachers and student now find themselves in and what that means for me going forward in my career.

### **Auto-ethnography**

I hope to be an effective teacher. In order to do this, I must constantly self-reflect, analyze and recognize my own limitations and biases. This paper is an auto-ethnography. An ethnography is the study of individual cultures. Since this is an auto-ethnography, this paper will be a reflective study of me, my teaching, and my experiences as a student and as an emerging teacher. What makes me who I am as an educator and how will my experiences inevitably affect my students? In education classes, you are taught that learning does not happen in a vacuum.

Students will bring in their lives, their problems, and their biases. Yet, we are never taught how to address our own. If the students bring in their own biases, most certainly we are bringing in ours. Often as teaching candidates we are told to present the facts and leave our biases at home. This is unfair to the students, for no person can be unbiased. Our opinions, thoughts and perceptions make us who we are. Rather than ignoring the fact that every teacher has biases, we must aim to surface and explore within ourselves, our past and our education to find what has molded ourselves, our thoughts and our pedagogy. Only then do we become truly aware of how we are teaching and why we teach in that manner. If one does not understand the root of one's teaching, motives and pedagogy, then there is no hope in understanding how one is affecting students. Through this paper I am attempting to better understand myself and the motives behind my teaching. Although my teaching experience has been limited (twenty weeks), and I am a novice teacher, I want to begin the practice of reflecting and analyzing my teaching in order to improve.

### **History of Standardization**

This paper aims to look at the spectrum of standardization of education to the pedagogy, or teaching method, of differentiation both in my personal life as a student and at my career as a teacher. I want to answer the question, "How do we as teachers differentiate instruction in a standardized model?" Standardized testing is ever increasing and is now the basis for evaluating student, teacher and school performance, which can often lead to standardized instruction in order to get through the content covered by the standardized test. A standardized test is defined as:

any form of test that (1) requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from common bank of questions, in the same way, and that (2) is scored in a “standard” or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students (“Standardized Test,” 2015).

The definition above states the purpose of standardized tests. The goal of standardized tests was to improve efficiency in assessing a mass group of people (Linn, 2010, p. 29). This type of testing can be seen throughout history and all around the world. Standardized testing began in China with civil service exams to place citizens in government positions (Fletcher, 2009). The next step in standardized testing came in 1905 when Alfred Binet created the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test to measure IQ in France. The test was created to measure general intelligence and levels of mental retardation. One of the early forms of the test focused on different mental abilities such as quantitative reasoning, visual-spatial skills, knowledge/comprehension and memory (Becker, 2003, p. 3). The idea of intelligence back then was not as flexible as it is now. Test takers had to fit into the mold of the test or they were labeled as mentally retarded. The test had its limits on measuring cognitive ability.

In American history, there has always been a relationship between the American public school system and standardized testing. With the growth of the public school system in America, schools developed ways to “track” students, meaning to have students continue in school, or have them begin a vocation. Students were tracked based on how they did in school and on tests. New York State took hold of this model before anyone else. In 1784, the state created what is

known as the “Regents of the University of the State of New York,” which acts as the educational agency in the state. The Board of Regents established the Regents Examination for a few reasons. It first began as an exit exam from the eighth grade to determine whether a student was qualified to begin high school (Johnson, 2009, p. 5). Soon there were calls for a high school exit exam, which would award high school diplomas that had greater prestige than other local or vocational diplomas (Linn, 2010, p. 30). The Board of Regents expanded the Regents Examination to test specific content areas, rather than a holistic test of material covered in high school. At the pinnacle of this testing the Regents exams were offered in sixty-eight subject areas in 1925 (Johnson, 2009, p. 6). Both practices of awarding separate diplomas and having content-specific tests are in place today.

In order to track students who were bound for colleges, public and private schools each had their own acceptance test. This system was chaotic, and left secondary schools unprepared in prepping their students. As a result the College Board was founded to standardize college acceptance measures (Linn, 2010, p. 34). Soon after followed the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 1926 and then the American College Testing (ACT) in 1959 (Fletcher, 2009). These tests measured students’ ability and their scores would determine if they were accepted into college.

In 2001 standardized testing increased nationwide due to President George Bush’s educational policy, No Child Left Behind. The program called for an increase in state mandated tests. These scores would be used to assess school success, which in turn would determine school funding. This, however, is not a new idea. Horace Mann took on the role of Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1837. Mann wanted to reform education in the State. Part of his plan was to hold schools accountable. He did this by issuing a statewide, standardized test in order to measure educational achievement (Garrison, 2010, p. 67). Mann established that

having a standardized test as the measure of achievement was a more fair way of testing students and that it removed the possibility of favoritism. He also felt that the test was impartial, since all students would answer the same questions. He felt that having a written exam rather than an oral exam allowed the state to test a larger breadth of knowledge and allowed students to develop their ideas further than an oral exam would allow them to (Garrison, 2010, p. 68). By having schools take the same exam, Mann gained “evidence” on school performance. This allowed him to discredit schools and schoolmasters who opposed his reform. The tests also made the schools accountable to the state on their performance (Garrison, 2010, p. 96). The state could see how schools were doing in regard to teaching their students content. If the schools’ test scores were low, the state would force schools to accept Mann’s reform.

The desire of the government to have schools, administrators and teachers be accountable to the government is reflected in current educational policy. In 2001 the No Child Left Behind Act was passed. The act called for annual state testing on grades 3 through 8 and once in high school for mathematics and reading (Segool, 2013, p. 489). The act also called for states to administer the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) every two years to students in 4<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade in mathematics and reading as well (Library of Congress, 2009, p. 3). Based on these test results, schools will receive grants or other forms of aid (Segool, 2013, p. 489). Since aid is based on test scores, there has been an increase in the administration of standardized tests. However, the governmental policies do not stop there. Upon entering office, the Obama Administration passed legislation known as Race To The Top (RTTT). This legislation has been aimed to reform four main areas. These are: 1. the development of rigorous standards and better assessments, 2. adoption of better data systems to provide schools, teachers, and parents with information about student progress, 3. support for teachers and school leaders to become more

effective and 4. increased emphasis and resources for the rigorous interventions needed to turn around the lowest-performing schools (“Race to the Top”, 2015). Putting these four goals aside, Race to the Top is a way in which to fund public schools. Participating in Race to the Top is voluntary and in order to receive federal funding, schools must comply with Race to the Top standards. A key piece of Race to the Top is the evaluation of teachers and principals. New York State created a new evaluation system in order to secure federal funds; this system is known as the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR). In this system, teachers are rated as Highly Effective, Effective, Developing or Ineffective. Sixty percent of their rating comes from observations, student and parent questionnaires and/or teacher artifacts. The remaining forty percent comes from student achievement on standardized tests. Under Race to the Top and APPR, teachers are now evaluated and ranked on how their students perform on a test (Leonardatos, 2014, p. 4). Linking test scores to teacher evaluations ensures that standardized tests remain in place. Government policy and federal funding are now associated with standardized testing. A school cannot receive Race to the Top federal funds if it does not produce desirable standardized test scores.

### **Standardization as a Student**

As a student of the New York State system, I have taken my fair share of state-mandated tests and learned how to master them through test taking strategies, but the most noteworthy memory of standardization comes from my time in college. At Syracuse University, we only take one class about special education. The class’s goal is to focus on how to teach us to differentiate for our students with and without special needs or learning disabilities. I valued the class and the techniques that it put in my educational toolbox, but there were claims made in that class that I did not appreciate and found unwarranted. The teaching assistant was giving a lecture and she



began discussing IEPs. She had been a special education teacher in a contained classroom within a public school. She went on to say how IEPs were bad and they label the student, which in turn causes teachers to narrow their thinking of their students. She said that IEPs do more harm than good and that schools should get rid of them. After a little while of this I raised my hand. I said something along the lines of how I do not believe that it is right that she was making sweeping generalizations of how IEPs are used and how teachers view them. If she claimed IEPs did more harm than good, than I wanted an example. All I got from her was silence. She had no response to my comments.

I knew why I was infuriated. I was frustrated that she was making claims without providing examples or enlightening us about her ideas. I know now that this was a case of both teacher and student bringing in personal biases. I was also mad for more personal reasons than her simply not backing up her claims. When I was in kindergarten and first grade I had an IEP because of a severe speech impairment, which eventually led to my difficulty learning to read. In the first grade we took a standardized test to place us on a spectrum of learning. I placed out of the spectrum where students need extra services by one point. The school district took my IEP away and all possible supports. They said, since I passed with one point, I did not need support from the district. A child who could not read did not need support. I often wonder, if my parents were not educators, or had the financial means to have me tested and then later tutored, if I would have made it through high school. Now my TA did not know my personal story, but I am someone for whom the absence of an IEP, having it taken away from me, hurt me more than having one or being labeled would have. I became angry because I would never want that to happen to a child who needed supports.

A question that goes further, though, is why do not all students have IEPs? All students are individuals and all students learn in their own way. An IEP is a plan that tells how the student learns well, what they need to succeed, and goals for the year. This is what should be done for each student. Each student should have a say in how they are taught. Students know how they prefer to learn, so why do we not just ask them? What an invaluable resource it would be to know every one of your students' learning preferences and to have goals that you can help them reach. Having an IEP for every student would help all teachers focus on differentiation to help meet the needs of the students. Some may say that this is too much, that it is too time consuming to both write the IEPs and for the teachers to read them. These people may have a point. But rather than doing what my TA advocated for, abolishing IEPs, I believe all students should have an IEP, for both teachers and students would benefit.

### **Problems with Standardization**

The increase in standardized tests has been controversial and detrimental to students and teachers alike. There has been a rise in anxiety in children; the increase in high stakes testing and grades has been listed as a catalyst (Segool, 2013, p. 490). The stakes, however, are not just for the children. More and more, the teachers are becoming the targets of standardized testing scores. With the new Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR), teachers' effectiveness is largely based on how their students perform on the standardized test in their content area. Is this a fair measure of a teacher's ability? Is it their fault if their students rarely come to school or refuse to try, which inevitably leads them to do poorly on the exam at the end of the year? There has also been a gap in performance between city schools and suburban schools, begging the question of the "fairness" of using standardized tests as measures.

C.W. Odell was a critic of standardized examinations in the early twentieth century. He published a book entitled *Traditional Examinations and New-Type Tests* (1928). His lists of criticisms are still resounding today. He writes, “Examinations are injurious to the health of those taking them,” “Examinations too often become objectives in themselves,” and “The time devoted to examinations can be more profitably used otherwise” (Linn, 2010, p. 30).

The issues that Odell brings up are the same complaints coming from teachers today, beginning with the idea that the exam becomes the object itself, rather than lesson objectives. Today in schools, one often hears the term “kill and drill” as a teaching practice. This is the idea that a teacher delivers the content that they know will be on the Regents exam at the end of the year, and then the students practice it over and over until they remember it. Often they are simple facts or phrases associated with an event, which have no higher order thinking involved. This is a classic example of rote memorization being confused with learning, and standardized testing leading to standardized instruction. Standardized tests do not ask students to think; rather, they ask students to remember. However, looking at the history of standardized tests, we should not be surprised that this has become the norm. After 1880, the New York State Board of Regents wanted teachers to teach to the test. The state gave teachers syllabi and a curriculum that fit with the test that the students would take for that subject (Johnson, 2009, p. 5). The idea of the test being the end goal, the object of learning, is not a new one; rather, it has been with us as long as standardized tests have been.

Odell’s complaint about examinations being injurious to the health of those taking them may seem far-fetched if not ludicrous. However, the increase in anxiety is a real problem in the high stakes testing world. Test anxiety can be defined as “emotional reactions typically accompany situations where our performance is being measured or assessed. If at any stage of an

evaluation we feel unprepared, unsure of our ability, or feel we have not performed to our best, we may experience feelings of unease, apprehension, distress or depression” (McDonald, 2001, p. 90). The main driver behind test anxiety is the “fear of evaluation.” Fear of failure and criticisms, fear of failing and simply taking the test have all proven to be a main stressor of school children (McDonald, 2001, p. 92).

With the increase in standardized testing under No Child Left Behind, many researchers have begun conducting studies on standardized testing and its links with anxiety. Since this is a new area of study, the test results have been mixed. Some studies have shown that high stakes testing does not increase anxiety within students, whereas other studies have reported that testing leads to heightened stress and worry (Segool, 2013, p. 490). In a study conducted by Joseph Pedulla and published by Boston College, he surveys 12,000 teachers about various aspects of state mandated testing. Eighty percent of teachers in high stakes settings have stated that their “students are under intense pressure to perform well on the state-mandated test” and similarly 80 percent of teachers say that “many students are extremely anxious about taking the state-mandated test.” Schools that are in a high stakes setting have lower student morale than students in a moderate to low stakes setting (Pedulla, 2003, p. 35). It has been proven that children equate test grades with intelligence, so much so, that they would lie to peers when they did poorly on an exam (McDonald, 2001, p. 91). Standardized testing is creating a false sense of intelligence. We are teaching students that the only way to be intelligent is by scoring well on an exam. Our system has put so much weight on exams that it is a primary stressor for students. This anxiety that is brought on by examinations can lead to physiological symptoms such as “muscle tension, elevated heart rate, sweating, feeling sick and shaking” (McDonald, 2001, p. 91). Is this how we want students to feel in school? Some studies claim that heightened test anxiety can lead students

to do worse on an exam; however, there are not enough studies that have proven this result to be conclusive yet. Either way, students are feeling anxiety and pressure from the standardized tests they are being asked to take.

The anxiety that testing creates is not just felt by the students, but increasingly felt by teachers as well. In Pedulla's survey, 92 percent of teachers in high stakes settings felt pressure from the superintendent to raise test scores, while 85 percent felt pressure from their principal to raise scores. Subsequently, only 43 percent of teachers agreed with the statement that "Teacher morale is high in my school" (Pedulla, 2003, p. 41). The risks associated with test scores lead teachers to be under significant pressure from their superiors. In New York State, teachers' jobs are linked to test scores. Testing is creating an environment in schools that is not only more stressful for students, but for teachers also.

The last of Odell's concerns, "The time devoted to examinations can be more profitably used otherwise," can easily be seen. If teachers' jobs and school funding are connected to test scores, they will most likely spend more time focusing on test material. This means that with more time spent on certain areas in a subject, other themes or topics may be left out if those will not be covered by the test. Teachers in Pedulla's study who were considered to teach in a school where there were high stakes for both the school and the students based on test scores stated that, since new testing mandates have been put in place, they have increasingly spent more time on tested areas. For example, 80 percent of teachers agreed with the statement, "There is so much pressure for high scores on the state-mandated test teachers have little time to teach anything not on the test" (Pedulla, 2003, p. 41). Forty-three percent of teachers in high stakes settings said that they "increased a great deal" time spent on tested areas and 36 percent said that they "moderately increased" the time they spent (Pedulla, 2003, p. 60). Since more time has to be

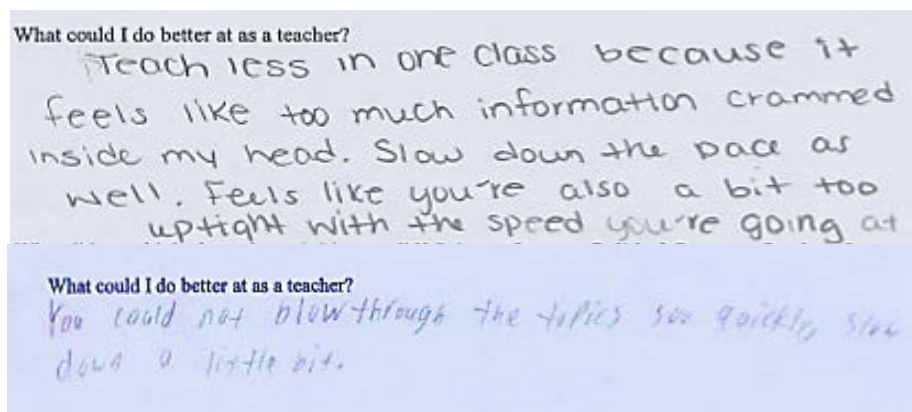
devoted to studying for state mandated tests, teachers and schools have to cut out time devoted to other areas. Pedulla found that in the high stakes schools 16 percent of teachers found that time devoted to the fine arts “decreased a great deal,” while other teachers found that it “moderately decreased.” In relation to industrial and vocational education, 16 percent of teachers stated that they have seen it “decreased a great deal” and 15 percent said they have seen it “moderately decreased” (2003, p. 61). State standardized testing is making it harder for teachers and schools to teach what they find relevant. When rewards, such as federal aid, or threats of state takeover of a school are linked with test scores, more of a teacher’s and a school’s focus will become the test.

### **Standardization as a Teacher**

It is safe to say that in my personal experience I have felt the negative effects of standardization more as a teacher than I have as a student. As a teacher, it becomes hard to balance the desire of what one wants to teach versus what one has to focus and dedicate time to. Teaching to the test is the antithesis of why we should be teaching. There are other ways to assess students rather than having them take a test. Students can participate in debates, create multi-modal projects or write stories; they should not be confined to test assessment. I aim to teach students how to analyze, think for themselves, and find patterns in history and apply them to their lives and their community in order to become better global and national citizens. My objective is not to teach students how to fill in a multiple-choice test. I know that it is part of my duties as their teacher to teach them how to take a test, but I never want that to be my main focus. My goal as a teacher is to find ways to present information in a meaningful way and assess my students in a way that makes sense to them and works toward their strengths.

However, I have often failed to reach my goal and fall into standardized instruction and assessment.

At the beginning of my student teaching, my host teacher told me not to worry if I messed up. His reasoning behind this statement was, “What you will be teaching in your time here covers less than ten percent of the Regents exam. If the students do not understand what you are teaching it is not a huge deal because it comprises so little of the test.” To me having my students understand what I am teaching is the essence of the job. If they do not understand, then I am not an effective teacher. I know that my host teacher was simply trying to take the pressure off so that I was not as nervous. As I looked at the curriculum guide, I saw how it was structured to the Regents exam. This in turn affected how long I taught certain parts of history. For example, since the Regents does not ask any questions about the American Revolutionary War, I spent about fifteen minutes teaching it. The war that gave the country its independence did not even receive a fourth of class time. Furthermore, one can see a battle about how much time to spend teaching the U.S. Constitution. The Regents only asks one to two questions about the Constitution, but it is the basis of American History and political thought. If I could have I would have spent more than the week or so that I was given to spend on the U.S. Constitution. It is very apparent that topics that are relevant, or important, are not the ones driving the curriculum, but rather it is that standardized tests that determine what we teach, how much time we spend on a theme or a event and how much weight we give each topic.



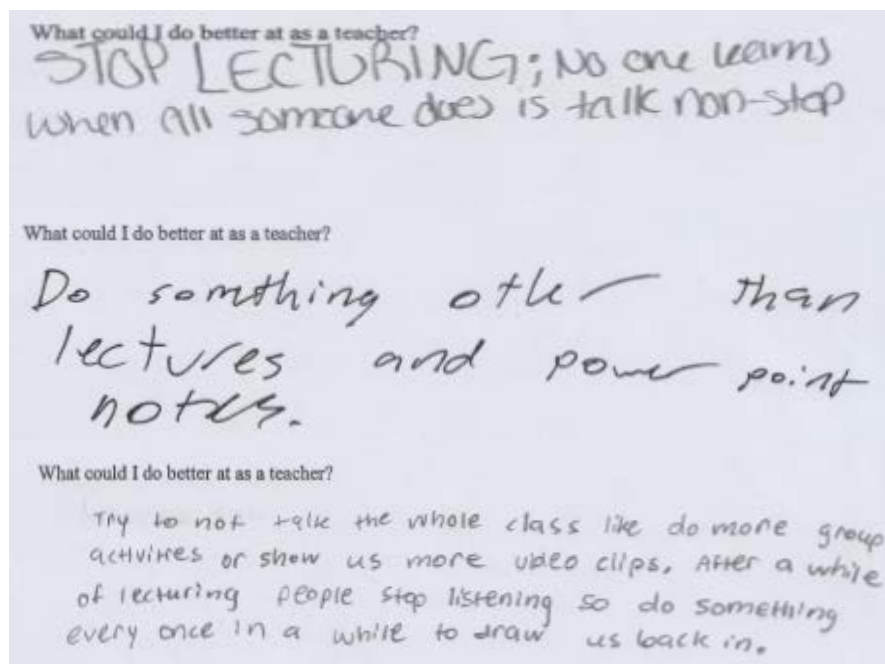
**Figure 1:** At the end of my full time student teaching I had students fill out a survey of my teaching. Some noted that I moved too fast through the material. When I was teaching I felt as though I had so much content to get through that I could not slow down.

It seems that in history classes the teaching method that is easiest and most time efficient is lecture. There is a lot of content that has to be covered in a short amount of time. While this is true for every content area, history is the one that tends to focus on lecture the most. It is by far the fastest way to deliver content, but it is not the most effective. The average attention span of an adult learner is fifteen to twenty minutes. The average attention span of a middle school student is ten to twelve minutes. Neither of these is conducive to a lecture setting. Studies have shown that after about ten to eighteen minutes of lecture students zone out. Once a student regains attention, the amount of time they are actively listening gets shorter and shorter. Furthermore, students tend to recall the most information from the first five minutes of lecture (Middendorf, 1996, p. 2). This becomes a challenge since the class periods that I was teaching were eighty-minute blocks. An eighty-minute lecture will not hold my students' attention. Many of my students attested to 'liking' lecture because it meant that they did not have to do anything. We do not want students coming to school feeling that they can sit back and do nothing. My students' views on lecturing are the exact opposite of how I view learning and what I want my students to get out of my teaching.

I struggled with using lecture as my main way of conveying information throughout my student teaching, and I know that I will struggle with it for the rest of my career. It is easy to be tempted to only lecture, but what good does it do for the students? Why are we so keen on lecturing when we know that differentiation and breaking up the content helps the students have



a deep understanding of the content? Maybe it is selfish on our part. We love the content and want to talk about it, or we do not want to plan the activities because that is more work than making a PowerPoint. Another reason we may lecture is because that reflects our own experience. Any college student will tell you that lecture is the prevailing way to deliver content. We may lecture in our classrooms because that is what is familiar to us. I know that I will have to challenge myself as an educator to not fall into the rut of simply lecturing, but presenting the material in a myriad of ways.



**Figure 2:** In the survey multiple students made it clear that I rely too much on lecture and and note taking. Not only that, but they asked for more differentiated activities.

During my full time student teaching, my host teachers had me conduct what we called seminars. Students would be given a main question and would then have to be able to debate both sides. I gave the students a packet of primary sources to help them form their arguments. The packet of primary sources was at a college reading level, so I pointed out in the textbook where the students could look for clearer reading and I also gave them a packet with information

that was at their reading level. The seminar topic was, “Who had a better idea for the nation, Alexander Hamilton or Thomas Jefferson?” After I had passed all this out, a day or two later, the AIS teacher came to me asking for help with one of my students. He was a student with an IEP and she was concerned about the readings. She said that the primary source packet in the past has been difficult if not impossible for the students. I showed her what part of the textbook correlated and also gave her a copy of the second packet of information. I walked through my expectations one on one with the AIS teacher and the student. I left saying that if he needed any help he could come work with me.

Even though I did all this, I still felt like it was not enough. Was I setting him up for failure? Was I giving him something that would just overwhelm him rather than help him practice his skills? I did not think that the reading in the textbook and the secondary packet were clear enough or provided the type of differentiation that the student needed. Maybe I should have sat down with him one on one to go over the different beliefs of the two founding fathers. Maybe I should have found simpler readings that were still substantive. The student did well in the seminar and received an 80 for his work. I know that a teacher’s role is not to make school easy for students but rather to challenge them and then support them through. I do not feel that I did this as effectively as I could have. I felt as if I let the AIS teacher handle supporting him, when I could have. Part of me knows that I did what I could as a novice teacher, but another part feels as if I could have done more. In all honesty I am aware that I do not have the strategies in my toolbox yet to be effective at differentiation.

### **Differentiation**

Another form of instruction and assessment is differentiation. Differentiation is when teachers recognize student talents, strengths, ability and interests and tailor their instruction to

them (Morgan, 2014, p. 34). Differentiated instruction is supposed to allow all students to access the same content and curriculum, but through various learning tasks and assessments based on the students' learning style (Watts-Taffe, 2012). The goal is not to mold the students to your instruction, but rather to fit your instruction to the students (Valle, 2011, p. 98).

Differentiation has different roots and different applications. Some say that the ideas of differentiation go back to Plato. The philosopher said that education should be based on the students' strengths and tailored to them. He said that students should be "studied" to decide what their strong suit was. Once determined, they should be educated and trained in that area (Rice, 2014, p. 238). This would begin the idea of tracking; students would be "tracked" or grouped based on ability. Their ability would determine the type of education that they received. Curriculum differentiation was used predominately in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It often placed students in a group of college-bound or bright, average, or slow (Valle, 2011, p. 9). Grouping students was considered an efficient way to teach the masses by teaching to a certain ability level (Valle, 2011, p. 5). Today differentiation is viewed in a much different light. It is not purely to divide students into ability groups. Classrooms today are much more diverse in ability level than they were in the 50s and 60s (Morgan, 2014, p. 36). Since this is the case, we must look at differentiation in a different way.

Differentiation is much more than tracking and grouping. The more common view of differentiation is that it is based out of Howard Gardner's idea of Multiple Intelligences. Gardner asks the question not how smart are you, but how are you smart. He is more interested in how students take in and process information and how they figure out problems. Gardner developed eight intelligences, which are still expanding. These are verbal-linguistic, visual spatial, logical mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, intrapersonal, interpersonal and naturalist. He argues

that every person is competent in all eight, but leans towards two or three of the intelligences (Christodoulou, 2009).

Each intelligence has its own abilities encompassed within it and there are activities that teachers can use to work towards these skills, foster the intelligence and assess the student based on their preferred intelligence.

Intelligence	Core Components	Application
Verbal-Linguistic	Sensitivity to the sounds, rhythms, and meanings of words; sensitivity to the different functions of language.	How can I get students to talk or write about an idea?
Logical-Mathematical	Sensitivity to and capacity to discern logical or numerical patterns; ability to handle long chains of reasoning.	How can I bring in number, logic, and classification to encourage students to quantify or clarify the idea?
Musical	Abilities to produce and appreciate rhythm, pitch and timbre; appreciation of the forms of musical expressiveness.	How can I help students use environmental sound or set ideas into rhythm or melody?
Spatial	Capacities to perceive the visual-spatial world accurately and to manipulate the mental representations that result.	What can I do to help students visualize, draw or conceptualize the idea spatially?
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Abilities to control one's body movements and to handle object skillfully.	What can I do to help students involve the whole body or to use hands-on experience?
Interpersonal	Capacities to discern and respond appropriately to the moods, temperaments, motivations, and desires of other people.	How can I use peer, cross-age or cooperative learning to help students develop their interactive skills?
Intrapersonal	Access to one's own feelings and the ability to discriminate among them and draw upon them to guide behavior; knowledge of one's own strengths, weaknesses, desires and intelligences.	How can I get students to think about their capacities and feelings to make them more aware of themselves as persons and learners?

Naturalist	The ability to recognize similarities and differences in the physical world.	How can I provide experiences that require students to classify different types of objects and analyze their classification schemes?
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Standardized instruction and the West's approach to education and assessment tend to focus on the logical, mathematical and linguistic side of the intelligences (Lefrancois, 1997, p. 239). If we only teach and assess students based on these two intelligences, we are leaving many students without support. Every student learns in a different way and to only teach to them in two ways is asking the students to mold themselves to your instruction. Through multiple intelligences, we have a chance to reach more, if not all, students by focusing on presenting the information in a myriad of ways.

Barbra Kline Taylor, a professor at Western New Mexico University, breaks down what differentiation should look like within the classroom setting at every step. She breaks it down into differentiating through content, process and product. The first step is looking at the content, or the material that you are teaching. What level of complexity are you teaching at? Classes tend to only have one textbook, which dictates what level to teach at. Students may be below that level, at that level or above. The challenge is to teach the same content, but be sure that all students are engaged (Kline Taylor, 2014, p. 14). In a history class, a way to present the same content at various levels would be to have the students read out of the textbook, which is the grade level that is expected of them, have them read a shorter summary of the content you want to cover, which would be a lower level of reading and have a primary source reading which would be above grade level. These three readings present all the same content but at different levels. I would have all my students read all three pieces in hopes that they would build off of each other. I would scaffold along the way to ensure that students at a lower reading level would

not get left behind. By having more challenging reading such as a primary source, this keeps more advanced students engaged.

The next step is to differentiate process. This is how you are presenting the content: the activities in which you share the content with your students (Kline Taylor, 2014, p. 14). Having students only read about the content, even if you are differentiating the reading, only speaks to the linguistic intelligence. There are many more ways to present content other than reading. For example, map activities help visual and hands on learners, and Jigsaw activities help present content while students work in groups, which appeals to kinesthetic and interpersonal learners. Presenting content does not have to be limited by reading, writing and lecture.

The last step is to differentiate the product; this is how the students are demonstrating their knowledge (Kline Taylor, 2014, p. 14). In a history class it could take many forms. The more traditional ways would be a test or an essay. Students could create political ads, participate in a debate, verbally share what they have taken away from the lesson or create a timeline. There are many more ways to assess students than simply having them take a test or write an essay. By varying forms of assessment, you allow students to demonstrate their knowledge by using their strengths. Often that can be more meaningful to them and more engaging than taking a test.

Not only does differentiation help make content more accessible to students, but it solves classroom management problems. Many behavioral problems stem from students being bored and not being engaged. This can happen easily if teachers never switch up instruction and always stick to the same process. Differentiation helps engage more students than traditional instruction if done properly. When students are engaged, they are focused on learning rather than having their minds wander (Morgan, 2013, p. 34).

Differentiation can happen in multiple forms. It is not limited to one structure or one type of assessment. There are extremely simple ways to differentiate. One way is providing multiple forms of texts. These can be secondary source, primary sources, websites, videos and pictures. So often we confine texts to books, but it is so much more than that. Students are expected to know how to read multiple texts (Boyd and Thompson, 2012, 154). Not only does this promote different literacy, but when students are presented with a wide array of texts on the same content, it gives them more exposure to the subject or theme, thus giving them more chances to understand the topic in a more meaningful, deeper way.

Another way to differentiate is by promoting more class discussion. Often students do not get a chance to talk about what they are learning. Often by talking through information, events or themes, students can come to conclusions that they may not have in another format (Connolly and Smith, 2002, p. 20). Debates, seminars and discussions offer the chance for students to work through different ideas. They also offer a unique chance for students to build off of one another's thoughts and point out information that other students may have forgotten or missed. Structured discussion is not only a differentiated instructional tool, but can also be used as an alternative form of assessment. One can differentiate further, by providing small group discussion before large group instruction. This allows shyer students to be able to participate. It also can allow students to collaborate better and have a greater chance of sharing than in large group discussions (Connolly and Smith, 2002, 20).

Another differentiation tool is using visuals. A simple way is accompanying content with pictures. Students who are visual learners will benefit from having something visual to connect with the material. English Language Learners, who may have trouble with English, may be able to follow along better with the aid of pictures (Fu, 2004, p.13). Furthermore, pictures can be used

as an assessment. Having students analyze photos promotes higher level thinking skills. Additionally, students for a project could create a collage or photomontage. This too promotes higher thinking by forcing students to make academic connections of content to photos. Some students may be able to better demonstrate their knowledge and express themselves through visual projects (Bustle, 2004, p.3). While these are only a few of the limitless ways to differentiate, it begins the thought process that instruction and assessment are not just limited to lecture, notes, and multiple-choice questions.

### **Differentiation as a Student**

In many instances standardized tests have confined students into proving that they are smart by taking a test. This goes against everything that Gardner theorized about human intelligence. Every student is smart in their own way. Some students are great test takers, other students are better at expressing their knowledge verbally or visually. Why don't we let them do this? Is it because that wouldn't be a quick and fair way to assess our students? During my public school career, I took at least fifteen standardized tests. The common phrase we asked was, "Will this be on the Regents?" If the answer was "no" we were conditioned not to care. Through standardized instruction and assessment, we have conditioned students to only care about test material and grades earned on the test. We are underserving them by sticking them in the box of logical-mathematical or verbal-linguistic intelligences. Not all students fall into these intelligences and we should foster learning through differentiation, not stamp it out with standardization.

All of the learning experiences that I had as a student that I cherish are ones where I was able to express myself in different formats. These were the times that I excelled; these were moments where teachers, using differentiation, inspired and pushed me to do my best. Although



my first four years of schooling were difficult, my fourth grade classroom changed my life, my self-perception and my confidence. It is because of my three fourth grade teachers that I decided to go into education. The classroom, in the public school that I went to, was made up of forty-four students and had three teachers. It was a mixed classroom, meaning that multiple students had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). The teachers' goal was to make all forty-four of us feel smart. They practiced and believed in Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. They aimed to show each one of us that we were smart in our own ways and at every moment gave us chances to prove it. They were the masters of differentiation. They knew how to pick up on a child's interest and foster it. For me it came in the form of history. Fourth grade is when students learn New York State history. Rather than simply reading about the history or being told the history, they let us experience it. We learned Native American history, specifically that of the Haudenosaunee, we read stories, we made corn husk dolls, we played Haudenosaunee games. They taught us the history through every possible means of intelligence. They did this with every subject, but history is what stuck with me. They saw this and pushed me in that direction. They gave me books, videos and would follow up with questions to hold me accountable.



**Figure 3: Me with my Fourth Grade teachers.**

It came time for the end of the year project, where each student was to become an expert on a topic of their choosing. I picked the Underground Railroad. To do well on the project you had to display in a myriad of ways information on the subject. I had to create a poster board with facts, a PowerPoint presentation, a picture book with a story line, ‘artifacts’ that go along with the topic and an oral presentation. It is the most complete form of assessment and application that I have ever experienced in my entire public and private school career. I had felt that I had truly learned about my topic. My teachers were impressed with the amount of work that I had compiled for my presentation, they had thought about giving my two tables for my display since I brought in so much work.

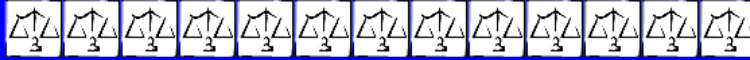
The reason this year of schooling, and this project in particular, resonated with me is because it was the first time in my life where I felt smart. It was one of the few times that I had not been tested in a “test” format, or through purely reading and writing. My three teachers frowned upon standardized testing and told us all that those tests were just for the state and could not tell us how smart we were, because we were all smart in our own ways. They did not just say this, they meant it and we believed it. Since we believed it, we all excelled. They pushed us and encouraged us. Without them my love of history and desire to teach it and pass it on would have never become a reality. I wonder if I would have done as well in middle and high school if I did not have them as my influences. They showed me that teachers can change a child’s world. They inspired me to change other children’s worlds and show students that they are smart.

### **Differentiation as a Teacher**

Differentiation is what made me excel in school. It built my self-efficacy and my self-esteem. This is why I went to school for Secondary History Education. However, it would prove much more difficult than I had imagined. I did not completely understand the prowess of my fourth grade teachers until I went to college and began to learn about pedagogy. What they accomplished in the classroom is an extremely hard feat. Differentiation is what I have struggled with the most as a student teacher, yet it is the thing I most desire to achieve. The further I go into my teaching, the more I realize how hard it is to do what my three teachers did. They were master teachers who taught to our strengths in order to make us better students.

In my own teaching experience, I have come to learn truly how hard it is to differentiate, but I have also seen the benefits. In my full time student teaching, I taught four sections of 11<sup>th</sup> Grade United States History. I was teaching the three branches of government and had about a week in which to do so. In two of my sections, my host teacher wanted me to only lecture using a PowerPoint and have the students take notes. In my other two sections, my second host teacher encouraged me to have the students do a WebQuest project where the students broke up into groups and researched a branch of the government. Each student was responsible for filling out a worksheet with basic information about their branch of government. After two days in the library doing research, students within their group were to create a PowerPoint presentation and an information sheet for their peers. We spent a class period having the students present their information. During the presentation, the students had to fill in a packet with the information that was being presented to them about all three branches. To finish this portion of the unit, I had students do stations that went over the roles and responsibilities of the branches of government to further reiterate the point.

**Task:** The class will be divided into groups of 4. Each group will be assigned a branch of government: (Executive, Legislative, and Judicial). Each student is responsible for researching their branch, answering a series of questions about their assigned branch, and finally preparing a power point presentation (as a group) to present to the class. Each group will also provide an information sheet/study guide on their branch to be given to the rest of the class. Each student will be responsible for doing the individual work, as well as, participating in the group presentation.



**Process:** Once the groups are formed, follow these easy steps:

1. Individually – Go to the websites found under the resources and begin to research your branch of government
2. Individually – Complete the following worksheet: [Constitution Worksheet](#)
3. Collaboratively – Meet with your group members and discuss your research
4. Collaboratively – Brainstorm ideas for your group power point
5. Collaboratively – Be sure to use symbolism and pictures as well as text
6. Collaboratively – Be sure to use examples
7. Collaboratively – Be sure to make modern day connections
8. Collaboratively – Each power point should have a total of 10 – 15 slides
9. Collaboratively – Create an information sheet that you will hand out to the class that contains important information about your branch of government

**Figure 4:** This was part of the WebQuest. It listed what the goal of the project was and what the students and their groups would be responsible for.

At the time, I felt as if I had almost wasted time with my second group of students. I spent more than a week of class time teaching the branches. The classes that only received lecture had moved ahead in the government unit. We are taught that as teachers we have very little time and must be effective and efficient in how we teach. I felt that I had not been efficient with my second group of students who did the project; I could have delivered the information and then moved on to save time. I did, however, discover that as all four classes moved on, the group of students who had had a more differentiated approach to the branches could more readily answer questions about the government and connect the government to events in history than the group that only received lecture. I also discovered that when asking application questions to the group that only received lecture, I often had to go back over the roles and responsibilities of the specific branches before they could form an answer to my question. Both of these findings surprised me, but they should not have. The ratio, which is how much cognitive work the teacher is doing in comparison to the students, in a lecture situation is severely skewed to the teacher (Lemov, 2011, p. 92). The teacher is the one doing the majority of the cognitive work. There are ways to make lecture more interactive, such as checking for understanding or asking real world

applications as you go. I tried to do this, but as a novice teacher I sometimes get too caught up with the content and do not focus enough on student understanding. For the students who had to participate in the project, the ratio leaned toward them. My role was to provide direction, guidance and scaffolding when needed. For the most part they were responsible for their learning and then responsible for teaching their peers. These students were more hands-on with the content and were exposed to it repeatedly and in different ways. It should be no surprise that these students are the ones that can pick up quicker in applying historical events and their controversies to the government, since they spent a greater amount of time working on the base knowledge.

In my first round of student teaching, which is known as candidacy, I had two sections of Honors 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Global and one section of Regents 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Global. In this placement, I was much more focused on how to present the content in a differentiated way where the students would be doing the majority of the cognitive work. I was responsible for teaching the students about the Tong and Song Dynasty as well as the Mongols. I had students do concept formations about isolationism, a jigsaw about Tong/Song inventions and contributions, a graphic organizer comparing views of foot binding from an NPR article, a historical fiction novel, and a primary source. My approach to the unit was much more focused on deductive learning than my full time student teaching was. This was noticed by my students. For the most part, I did the same activities with my honors students as I did with my Regents students, except with my Regents students I had to make sure to scaffold more to build them up to the point I was trying to make. One of my honors students, who my host teacher thought should be in the Regents class, pulled me aside one day and told me that since I had started teaching, it was the first time she felt that she had learned anything in the class. At first I was elated. I had finally had one of those teaching

moments that you hear of; I had reached a student! Then as I reflected on it, my heart broke. It was March, which meant that this student did not feel as if she had been learning for the past six months. After thinking about it, I concluded that she was not supported enough. I understand that an Honors class will move faster and go deeper into the subjects, but even in Honors classes, I believe that you have to teach to the lowest student. You have to make sure that every student understands the concepts, even if that means varying teaching styles or spending more time on an area than what you were expecting.

Role of Women: Comparison Chart	
Describe foot binding:	
Author of NPR article:	Zhou Guizhen:
Snow Flower and the Secret Fan:	Analects for Women:
Do you notice any comparison between the four views?	

**Figure 5:** This was a graphic organizer that I created to have my students compare and contrast the views of footbinding and women in China under the Tang and Song Dynasties. They had to compare the views from a book they were reading in their English class, to a news article and a primary source.

I understand that this might not seem realistic. After all, I was able to focus on this idea because I was only part time student teaching. I only had three classes to plan for, rather than five or six. I am not in charge of after school clubs and I do not have to worry about a family at home. Nevertheless, I think that it should be an aim for all educators to teach to the lowest student, but this was not my focus in my full time student teaching. I was caught up already in the amount of work and planning that I had to do. My first teaching revelation was already lost in the shuffle of full time student teaching, which makes me ask myself what will be my focus and my aim when I am a first year teacher?

At the end of my candidacy, at my final evaluation, my host teacher was discussing the culture of the high school. The high school I was at produces high level students. They are all expected to do extremely well in their classes, of which they should be taking multiple honors or Advance Placement classes, along with being involved with clubs, theater and sports. The goal of the high school is clearly to prepare students for college. My host teacher said rather bluntly that the culture of the school is to teach to the high level students and if the lower level students get left behind, then that is just the way it is. She then referenced the girl who pulled me aside as an example of a student getting left behind for not being able to keep up. She spoke in a tone that had underpinnings of it's just too bad; this is the way things are. I have the utmost respect for my host teacher, but I was stunned by this statement. Is it not our very job to make sure that all children are learning? Or do we sacrifice the few for the benefit of the many? I have already grappled with this in my full time student teaching and will surely in my career.

I do know that for the student who was getting left behind, she felt that activities I did with her and all of my classes helped her learn more than she had all year. This shows that differentiation and using techniques that may not be standard worked for her, which surely

would work for other students. In fact, after surveying my students from my candidacy, they all said that they appreciated and learned well from the variety of activities that they did in class. Many of them said that my host teacher primarily lectured, which they did not like since they felt that they were not a part of it. Remembering this one student's experience, my host teacher's comments and my overall survey of my students drives me to want to become better at differentiation to include and teach to as many students as possible.

### **Conclusion**

After looking back on my education and then my role at the front of the classroom, I have learned that my drive for differentiation is from my own experience. Differentiation in the classroom was the first time that I felt smart and capable as a student. There is nothing like that feeling and I want to be able to give that back to my students. In my candidacy I was much more focused on trying to differentiate and presenting the information in numerous ways. When I taught with differentiation as my focus, students who had a harder time learning said that I made it easier for them to learn. That is the true joy of teaching, is it not? To help students understand content and for them to feel that they "get it." I want to build students up and help them develop skills, not simply to give them facts, have them memorize them and regurgitate them back to me. That is not learning.

However, the education culture in this country is growing evermore away from differentiation and more towards standardization and testing. The problem of standardization versus differentiation could not be any more prevalent than it is today. Governor Cuomo of New York State is trying to pass legislation that would require fifty percent of a teacher's evaluation to come from students' standardized test scores. School districts are allowing students to opt-out of state testing due to the anxiety and time away from the classroom that these tests cause.



Schools are hoping to undermine the State's system. By having mass amounts of students opt-out of the test, the data that the State collects from these tests would be faulty and skewed, since the population would not be accurately displayed.

The tests that are pumping out of the State take days to test and some claim that the questions on these tests are not reasonable for children's cognitive ability. The teacher's union is up in arms with Cuomo. It is a tumultuous time for teachers, students and the public school system. The State is trying to raise standards for education, but they are doing it in the wrong way. Forcing schools to assess their teachers with scores, to make students prove their intelligence by taking tests for days is wrong. It limits both the teacher and the student. The government has learned to incentivize tests by tying them to federal funding, which has increased the disparity between the rich and the poor. Educators have always wanted to make the schools better and help students learn, but they know that the problems with education are largely out of their control. Home life and poverty has been proven to be the number one influence on education. Yet this is not what the State has ever focused on. They remain committed to testing students and then using those scores to either reward or punish schools.

This is the environment that I am actively choosing to go into. An environment where student and teacher morale is low due to the amount of testing and the risks that goes along with bad scores. Honestly, I am scared. I am scared that I will succumb to teaching to the test. I am scared that my fear of evaluation based on the test will supersede my desire to teach my students in a meaningful way. I am scared I will not want to be a teacher. How do I avoid teaching that way if both the federal government and the state government are going to judge me on my students' standardized test scores? How do I differentiate in a one size fits all model? Already in my full time student teaching I was caught up in getting through the material, rather than trying

to make the history relevant to my students. The goal was not for them to truly learn, but to cover as much ground as I could in eleven weeks. My biggest regret of full time teaching was the fact that I did not dedicate more of my time to trying to differentiate and move away from lecture. I made excuses for myself, such as, “My host teacher only wants me to lecture,” or “I am just a student teacher so I do not have to focus on it.” I am so disappointed that I did not do more. The old adage stands, “You play like you practice.” Student teaching was my practice, and I certainly know that that is not how I want to play. I want to be a teacher that considers the multiple ways in which students learn and tailor my teaching to that, not to a standardized test written by the state.

In order to make this more of a reality and to expand my knowledge on differentiation, I will most likely be attending Nazareth College for graduate school in their Inclusive Adolescent Education program, which largely focuses on differentiation. Doing nothing to learn and expand my toolbox after realizing the lack of knowledge and techniques I have when it comes to differentiation would be a disservice to me as a professional and to my future students. A major part of being an effective teacher is reflecting and learning from one’s experiences and growing from that process. I know that this is only one step in the process and that my learning will continue beyond graduate school and into my career, but this is one step that will help me focus on differentiating for my students rather than teaching to the test.

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